

LAW SCHOOL?



- Do I Want to Be a Lawyer?
- How Do I Prepare?
- Taking the LSAT
- Using the LSDAS
- When and Where to Apply
- Applications and Personal Statements
- References and Deans' Forms
- Admissions Decisions
- Paying for Law School
- Questions?
- Pre-Law Self-Assessment

Do I Want to Be a Lawyer?

Here are some ways to find out whether a law career is a good fit for you:

- Discuss your interests, values, skills, and lifestyle preferences with a CDO advisor.
- Fill out the “Pre-Law Self-Assessment” at the end of this guide for discussion with a CDO advisor.
- Talk with family and friends who are lawyers or law students.
- Use the AlumNet database in E-Access (under Mentors) to contact Smith women in legal careers. When possible, schedule informational interviews at their work sites and observe their environments and daily routines.
- Follow legal issues in the media.
- Attend local legal proceedings, in city, county, state and/or federal courts.
- Read career information on law available on the CDO website.
- Take an internship/summer job in a legal setting.
- Visit the graduate school section of the CDO website.

How Do I Prepare?

There is no pre-law curriculum; you can major in any field, and still be “pre-law.” Your GPA is important to law schools, so it makes sense to major in a field you enjoy and in which you are therefore likely to do well. Since law schools consider the difficulty of courses as well as grades, it may be wise to pursue a few areas in depth rather than taking introductory courses in many fields. Law schools seek students with good writing and analytical skills; be sure your academic background and application demonstrate these qualities.

Law schools want a diverse student body and consider many factors in addition to grades and LSAT scores (particularly since the average age of students entering law school is about 27). Some admission factors are: racial, ethnic, geographic or socioeconomic background; undergraduate institution; accomplishments on campus or in the wider community (arts, sports, politics, etc.); student leadership; internships and jobs; obstacles you may have overcome; and ways in which you are unique. If any of these factors are part of your background, be sure to mention them in your application.

Taking the LSAT

The LSAT (Law School Admissions Test) is required of all applicants to US law schools, and is offered at sites throughout the US and overseas. It’s helpful to take the test during the summer before you plan to apply (15 months before you hope to start law school) because then you can use your score in selecting schools. The fall exam date is also suitable, but be prepared to submit your applications as soon as you know your score. Taking the winter test is also possible, but will delay review of your applications.

The best way to prepare for the LSAT is through sustained practice over a period of time. There are many ways to prepare; you can use the sample test provided in the application packet, a test preparation book, an independent study program, a study group, and/or a formal preparation course. Courses are available locally through Kaplan Educational Centers and The Princeton Review.) Effective preparation for the LSAT will give you an idea of what to expect on the test, and may make you more relaxed while taking it.

LSAT registration booklets are available in the CDO and from LSAC (www.lsac.org). Regular registration is usually one month before each exam date; late registration is possible but will cost more. (Fee waivers are available under special circumstances.) The exam takes about four hours but because of pre- and post-test activities you can expect to be at the test center for about six hours. You must bring your test admission ticket and the required identification document(s) with you.

Plan to take the LSAT only once. If you repeat the test, law schools will usually average your scores rather than using the higher one. Unless you're confident your scores will improve significantly, there's little to be gained from a second testing.

When you take the LSAT, please check "yes" on the item authorizing LSDAS to send a copy of your score to the CDO. Results are confidential but cumulatively they help us advise other Smith applicants about their law school choices.

Using the LSDAS

Most law schools require applicants to register with the LSDAS (Law School Data Assembly Service, www.lsac.org), a service providing law schools with standardized summaries of your academic work, copies of college transcripts, references, LSAT scores, and writing samples. There is a fee for subscribing to the service and for reports sent to the schools. Fee waivers are available and explained on the LSAC website.

After you receive a registration acknowledgment from LSDAS, follow its procedures for submitting your official Smith transcript, as well as transcripts from any other academic institution you have attended. Allow at least one month for the processing of your transcripts. You'll receive a summary from LSDAS; read it carefully, check the figures, and report any discrepancies immediately. Allow approximately six weeks for your references to be distributed by LSDAS and received by the schools.

When and Where to Apply

Most schools use a rolling admission policy, accepting applications over an extended time period, beginning as early as November. There are advantages to applying early, even if the official deadline is in the spring. Fewer slots are open later in the process, making each one more competitive. *The Official Guide to US Law Schools* gives general information about each law school approved by the American Bar Association. It's available in the CDO library and can be purchased when you register for the LSAT/LSDAS.

Browse the websites of schools that interest you, and ask for any other material you need to evaluate them. Meet with law school admission representatives who attend the fall Graduate and Professional School Fair at UMass. You can also meet with law school representatives at the fall law forums sponsored by the LSAC (www.lsac.org) in many cities, including New York and Boston.

When you know your GPA and LSAT scores, weigh your chances of admission at each law school of interest. Check the charts in *The Official Guide* and on the LSAC website to see how applicants with your credentials fared last year at specific schools.

Also review the Boston College Law School Locator (www.bc.edu/offices/careers/gradschool/law/lawlocator/), which groups schools by their general GPA/LSAT expectations.

The application process to law school is expensive and time consuming; it's important to focus your efforts on schools where you will be competitive, and to limit your reach choices. Avoid applying to schools whose stats indicate that you have virtually no chance of being accepted; on the other hand, apply only to schools you would really want to attend.

Consider the following criteria in making your final selection:

- **Quality:** The number of excellent law schools is far greater than most people realize and the curriculum at each of them is much the same. Look carefully at elective courses and cross-registration possibilities and at clinical programs and opportunities for term-time and summer work.
- **Students:** size, composition and student body diversity. You may want to contact the relevant student group(s) and Smith alumnae who are studying there for first-hand impressions.
- **Faculty:** strength, composition and availability.
- **Facilities:** physical resources in general, library, student housing, etc.
- **Setting:** geographic location; atmosphere of the law school and its neighborhood.
- **Placement:** Look at the school's career office website and, if necessary, ask for more information. Where are graduates headed in the legal job market? What is the school's track record in fields that interest you? Does the school help with summer jobs for first and second year students?

Application and Personal Statement

Complete your applications carefully, answering all questions, demonstrating your writing skills, and typing your answers (if the forms are not available on the school's website.) Attach your resume if a law school requests one, but never write "see resume" on an application even if its questions duplicate some of your resume. It's helpful to write a first draft of your application on a copy of the application form, then make revisions and type your final version on the original, or submit it online.

For most applications you will be asked to write a personal statement answering an open-ended question about your accomplishments and career goals. Interviews are not normally part of the law school admission process; this statement is your chance to give the admission committee a sense of who you are, what has shaped you, and what has influenced your decision to apply to law school.

Make sure your statement is direct and personal in tone; it doesn't need a formal opening or closing because it's being read in the context of your entire application. Write in the first person ("I concluded" not "The researcher concluded"). Avoid global statements such as "Lawyers should be..." or "The law is..."; your statement will be read by admissions staff who know the realities of the field. Above all, be sure it is well-written, grammatically correct and concrete. The CDO has resources to help you write an effective personal statement and CDO advisors are glad to review drafts.

References and Deans' Forms

Most law schools require at least two academic letters of recommendation (references); occasionally letters from employers are also relevant. What is written is more important than who writes it. Law schools want specific comments on your breadth and depth of knowledge, ability to analyze, critique, write and solve problems, and on your general aptitude for the study of law. Be sure to ask for recommendations early, when there is still time for faculty members to give them careful attention.

A letter of recommendation service is offered as a convenience to LSDAS registrants, recommendation letter writers, and LSDAS-participating law schools. The forms can be downloaded from the LSDAS website (www.lsac.org). If you use the LSDAS service, your referees can send their letter directly to LSDAS. The referee may also send a copy to the CDO to be kept in your file.

Some law schools require a Dean's Letter certifying your good standing at the college. Both seniors and alumnae should send their request directly to the appropriate Dean's Office along with Dean's Certification forms from individual schools.

Admission Decisions

Law schools begin announcing acceptances as early as February. Many schools have a rolling admission process; it's wise to apply early. You should receive some indication of your status by the end of March, although applicants have occasionally been notified as late as August. If you're notified that a decision is being deferred, acknowledge the letter and enclose appropriate updating material, such as an additional letter of recommendation, a fall semester transcript, and/or a brief description of recent relevant experience.

Paying for Law School

Law school is very expensive, but there are ways to reduce the cost and/or limit your debts. Most states have a state law school or are affiliated with another state that does. These institutions usually cost significantly less than private schools, but admission is competitive. The cost of attending private law schools varies, but is usually comparable to fees at undergraduate private institutions.

The primary sources of information about financial aid are the law schools themselves. Financial aid deadlines are often earlier than admission deadlines. Ask right away for a financial aid application from each school to which you will apply. Also review the listings in the CDO funding binder "law."

Law schools in general do not offer much outright aid, although some schools offer merit scholarships or fellowships to their top applicants. A variety of loan programs enable you to borrow the entire cost of a legal education. Be sure to maintain a good credit rating. A poor rating can prevent you from qualifying for loans. Many loans require U.S. citizenship. Consult *The Official Guide* and the law school financial aid offices for more information on financing your legal education. Some law schools offer Loan Repayment Assistance Programs (LARPs) for students planning on working in the nonprofit for public sectors. We urge you to consider carefully the debt burden you will assume, should you take advantage of all the loans available.

Each spring Smith advertises three relevant sources of funding: David Burres Memorial Law Prize, a stipend for a portion of the first-year law school tuition for a student accepted to law school who plans to practice public interest law; the Barbara Jordan Award, awarded to an African American student or alumna entering or preparing to enter law school; and the Smith Alumnae Scholarship, which is to be put toward the first year of full-time graduate school.

Pre-Law Self-Assessment

Characteristics:

1. Do you enjoy working with people on events or issues that may significantly affect their lives?
2. Can you empathize with a client's situation, yet remain sufficiently objective to analyze the issues and their consequences?
3. Do you enjoy educating or teaching a person about a subject about which she may be ignorant or have significant misconceptions?
4. Are you able to articulate your analysis of a problem clearly and concisely verbally and in writing?
5. Do you enjoy being an advocate? Can you argue both sides of a question with enthusiasm?
6. Do you like detail work? Do you enjoy searching for the precise facts of a situation?
7. Do you like to read and study?
8. Do you enjoy the competition of games or sports (as player or fan)? If so, do you care who wins?
9. What is your level of tolerance for ambiguity?

Motivations:

1. Why do you want to be a lawyer?
2. What do you expect to get out of law school in addition to the diploma?
3. What would you like to do with a law degree? Do you have any ideas about what fields of law you would like to practice?
4. What exposure have you had to law and lawyers? Have you observed any court proceedings?
5. If you will not be going directly from Smith, what are you thinking about doing in between?

Admissions Factors (possible subject matter for a personal statement):

1. Why do you think a law school should admit you?
2. What courses/teachers have had the most influence on you? Why?
3. Which non-academic activities have been most important to you, and why?
4. What in your life are you most proud of? Why?
5. If you have taken time off from college, what were you doing?
6. If you transferred to Smith, where did you transfer from, and why?
7. Is English your "first" language? If not, which one is?
8. Do you wish to be identified in the admissions process as a member of a minority group?
9. Are there any noticeable changes/trends in your academic record? If so, how do you explain them?
10. Are there other factors that would be helpful for a recommender/admissions committee to know?

Law School Choice Factors:

1. What geographic area(s) do you prefer for law school?
2. Where would you like to practice law eventually?
3. Do you have any preferences about size and setting of the law school?
4. Are there any specific courses or clinics you would like to take while in law school?
5. How large is your debt for your undergraduate education?

Questions? For more information or help with the decision-making and application process, please phone the CDO at 413-585-2582 to schedule an appointment with a CDO advisor and/or consult the law-related information on the CDO website, under jobs and graduate school (www.smith.edu/cdo).